



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## The King, the Master, and the Thief

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 11, 2013*

*The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Luke 12:32-40*

We meet Jesus today in Luke's Gospel in a whirlwind of sayings and images and stories from Jesus' preaching ministry that have been compiled together, recorded in such a way that many ideas are presented to us rather like a montage sequence in a movie. At least that is how I would film it: First, I would show Jesus preaching "Don't be afraid, little flock" to a select few on some grassy hillside; then him preaching about finding treasure in heaven in the square of some village with a larger crowd around him; then him preaching from a boat on the Sea of Galilee to an even greater crowd on the beach about the master who serves the slaves; and then, finally, a night sequence with Jesus gathered with his friends in a circle on the beach after a long day of preaching, frying fish together, lit from below by the fire. And we would hear him telling his friends that they must be ready at all times, for God comes like a thief in the night. He would take a bite out of the fish. And it would cut to black and fade into the next scene.

A savvy viewer would note the contrast between the beginning and end of that montage, for there is a shift from light to dark, and a shift in tone, moving from the generous image of God as one who gives his kingdom away to the flock, to the darker image of God as the Unexpected One: much like a stealthy bandit; much like one who takes, rather than gives.

But Jesus is trying to lead us away from the fear of God, to reconfigure our typical take on God and the figures of our world. Throughout the Gospels, much of what we assume about life—how it functions, what it offers us—is turned inside out by God in Christ. In this reading alone, three representatives of the violent powers of this world are flipped on their heads. The King. The Slave Master. And the Thief.

Let's start with the first one, the King. The one with the most soldiers, the most swords or guns, and the most money. Jesus' king here acts nothing like any king we've seen before. This king is not someone to be afraid of, when every king knows that fear is one of the best tools he has: fear of imprisonment or fear of execution. This king is willing to give his kingdom away to others. Usually a king has to die or be murdered for such a thing to happen. If this is a king, what a king!

And next, a master acts towards his slaves like no master would. This Lord returns from a party, and rather than have his slaves prepare him for bed, he prepares his table for them. Even though he's partied hard, he takes the time to make them a meal. What a topsy-turvy night, the Lord and Master fetching the pepper for the help! If this is a Lord, what a Lord!

In the same way, if a thief, then what a thief.

If God is like a thief, though, it seems that it would be difficult to take Jesus seriously when he says, "Do not be afraid, little flock." I was speaking recently to former parishioners who had experience with a thief. Their home was burglarized while they were gone one day, and a year later they still are deeply disturbed by that invasion. They lost some of their possessions, but gained a pall of menace that hangs over their home and is hard to shake.

But this is not what Jesus is going after. He's going after a divine sort of thievery. One of God's saints, one we know so very well, is a great example. The holy bandit that sneaks in through our chimney in the dead of winter while not a creature is stirring. Santa Claus breaks into our home, not to take, but to give. When this thief comes into our home, we end up with

so much more than we had before. And after our home is broken into, what is left? Not a pall of menace, but an air of wonder and abundance and magic. Santa Claus has been up to this sort of holy thievery for centuries, all the way back to when he started out as a bishop in Turkey, and repeatedly broke into a family's home, each time with a gift of gold in the stockings, each gift delivering one of the daughters from a life of abuse and bondage. A thief who saves from slavery. What a thief!

All this giving. All this serving. If they keep this behavior up, these curious kings and masters and thieves will lose what they have, even their standard identities. They will become something new, something transfigured. These kinds of transfigurations will occur if you walk with Jesus long enough. The mourning laugh, the poor inherit the world, the teacher washes the student's feet, the first is last, the little child is brought to the head of the line, the revolutionary wins without a sword or dagger, the Messiah conquers by being killed, the height of God's glory found in the bottom of the barrel shame of the cross. These are not absurdities. They are reconfigurations made to stretch us into the truth of things, taking us away from the face value into the true value. A truth that builds on a new foundation, rather than on the false foundations of so much of our world—the world then and, sadly, the world now. A world that uses force and violence and coercion to structure itself, a world of typical tyrants and slave masters and thieves, a world that is allergic to the vision, the imagination, that God gives. A world that is being undone by the steady witness of the true reign of God, which gives the riches away and the power to others. The true mastery of God, which finds that mastery in humble service, and the true thievery of God which breaks through our hearts' defenses to give us more than we had before.

In Christ we know that God will not shove the truth down our throats. Even though we call God powerful, God's power doesn't work like that. God is continually generous. Continually willing to forgive. Continually willing to allow us to start over and walk in peace. And continually patient in love for us to come around. It may seem that this kind of power is nothing but weakness. But, I tell you, it is the only true power that there is. All other power fades. All other treasure crumbles.

But, here's the thing about all these treasures that God gives us. They can be close, and yet if we are not looking for them, we won't see them, and they might as well not be there. In our Genesis reading for today, Abram had his eyes set on Eliezer of Damascus, seething in resentment that he might have more than him someday. But God encouraged him to keep his eyes off of his rival next to him and instead to keep his eyes up, to look to heaven for guidance, to look to the number of the stars for a vivid sign of how much God had in store for him, if he would be open to it. Keep your eyes, Abram, not on what your neighbor could take from you, but rather on what heaven has prepared for you.

This is what it means when Jesus tells us to stay awake, to be vigilant, to be dressed for action and keep our lamp lights trimmed and burning. It's about keeping our eyes and our hearts and our prayers focused on heaven, so that heaven is not for later, but for now. So that it may be on our earth as it is in that heaven, the heaven of the king who gives the kingdom away, the heaven of the master who serves, the heaven of the thief who leaves a donation, the heaven of power shared not hoarded: the true power of God. If we keep our eyes to the stars of that heaven, if we make that heaven our treasure, our hearts will follow. Then our hands and feet, then our days, then our lives, then our world. So "Do not be afraid, little flock." This heaven is yours.

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